The crisis of the American Revolution

Chris Cutrone, Edith Fischer, and Ingar Solty

On April 10, 2026, as the opening plenary of its 18th annual Convention, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel at Northwestern University on the crisis of the American Revolution and its legacy. The speakers were Chris Cutrone (original lead organizer of Platypus and the Campaign for a Socialist Party), Edith Fischer (founding member of Communist Unity in Australia[1]), and Ingar Solty (Senior Research Fellow at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in Berlin and author of Trumps Triumph?, Der postliberale Kapitalismus, *and* Edition Marxismen[2]*). Platypus member Erin Hagood moderated the panel. An edited transcript follows.*[3]

Introduction

Following the reelection of Lincoln as president, Marx wrote to the American people: "From the commencement of the titanic American strife the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class. . . . [In America] the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century."[4] Given the seismic policies of Trump's second term, we ask: does the American Revolution persist today? What is, or was, the American Revolution? How does it inform the conditions of possibility for the Left in the present? What tasks, if any, does the Left inherit from the American Revolution, and do we need new interpretations of the American Revolution?

Opening remarks

Edith Fischer: I'm not an American, so I'm offering an outside perspective on the American Revolution. That is in part my point, that the fate of the American Revolution is indeed the fate of the world revolution.

The American Left today is not overly fond of the American Revolution. In the mainstream of American society, the American Revolution is elevated to a form of civic religion, based around a Thermidorian[5] Constitution which elevates the Revolution to myth while eliding its most revolutionary elements. With that in mind, it's necessary to place the American Revolution in the proper historical context, which in my understanding is the world-historical transition from feudalist society to capitalist society — from the *ancien régime* to bourgeois civilization. This transition is marked by "the revolution."

This revolution has an economic component: the abolition of serfdom, the spread of commercial capitalism in the Industrial Revolutions. It has a scientific dimension: Copernican, Darwinian, and also Freudian and Marxist-sociological — all part of the bourgeois scientific revolution. It has a political element: the Reformation, the Dutch Revolt, the English, American, French, Haitian, and Bolivarian Revolutions. The American Revolution is part of a global cycle of revolutions that begins before the Protestant Reformation, and arguably ends with the last great bourgeois revolution, which I would argue is the Xinhai Revolution in China (1911), which brought down the Qing Dynasty.

In that time, the American Revolution has passed through periods of retreat and advance. The Thermidorian Constitution, which birthed what Dan Lazare has called a conservative republic,[6] a republican monarchy of the Montesquieu type, was posed on the edge between revolution and counterrevolution. The second revolution, the great struggle of the abolition of slavery and the remaking of the American republic as a centralized republic — a political revolution as well as social — is then hampered by the defeat of Radical Reconstruction. In the 20th century you have the second Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, which in turn hits its own historical limits.

This long trajectory of the American Revolution is part of a world-historical dialectic of the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist society. But in the course of that revolution, the bourgeois historical project exhausts itself. The capitalist mode of production as a productive force for the transformation of human civilization has been brought to a halt by the objective limitations of capitalist development, and the dynamics of combined and uneven development mean that the bourgeois revolutions cannot be objectively completed within the system of bourgeois society. This gives birth to the great contradictions of capitalist civilization.

Today we have passed out of the epoch of bourgeois revolutions and into the epoch of proletarian revolutions. This transition, while not successful anywhere, has been particularly deformed in the United States. The U.S. has failed to give birth to even a labor party, let alone a revolutionary Marxist party. This has been largely because of the peculiarities of the American social formation, of the bourgeois revolution, and the sedimented historical failures of the American working class to break from the bourgeoisie. This failure means that each additional wave of struggle faces more limits.

The task remains to forge a political instrument that fits the task of making an American revolution in the epoch of mass capitalist politics. Just like the first cycle of revolution, this coming revolution will be international in character. In fact, it will be all the more internationalist, for it will reflect the internationalization of the capitalist system. This next American revolution, on which I do believe the hinge of world history still turns, which is certainly what Marx and Lenin believed, will be a hemispheric revolution that completes and negates the previous revolutionary condition. It will sweep aside the Thermidorian Constitution, overthrow the oligarchy, and complete the task of modernization and secularization. It will found a radically democratic republic which will extend from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego, uniting hundreds of millions underneath a single democratic state. It will finish the Civil War and Reconstruction, overcome the systematic racial oppression that dominates this country, and achieve democratic self-determination of nationalities and the emancipation of women. With the working class in power, this new American republic will carry the banner of liberty at the forefront of the workers of the world, and prepare for the coming of communism.

Chris Cutrone:[7] Hegel made an exception to his philosophy of history for America as a "land of the future."[8] He acknowledged to a friend that his model political regime of constitutional monarchy on the basis of the English Revolution was improved in the American Constitutional Republic as the ideal form of state for bourgeois civil society, with its elected monarchy in the presidency as counterbalance to democracy, to preserve the freedom of civil society. Marx and Engels regarded the United States as the most bourgeois, democratic, and free country of their time. Lenin called the American Revolution a "truly revolutionary war"[9] and wrote in the early 20th century that in America "freedom was most complete."[10]

For their part, Marxist-informed socialists in the United States such as the Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs claimed both the American Revolution and the Civil War and their political leaders as historical figures, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, to their cause and as their rightful legacy, as against the capitalist political parties — the Republicans and Democrats — falsely wearing their mantles. Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin greatly esteemed Debs, especially for his denunciation of U.S. imperialism and its involvement in World War I which had landed Debs in jail. Debs returned the praise, calling himself, during the counterrevolutionary panic after the Russian Revolution and Woodrow Wilson's Palmer Raids' repression of the Socialist Party, "from head to foot a Bolshevik and proud of it."[11]

Later, Frankfurt School Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno, who fled the Nazis to the United States, along with his colleagues Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, wrote endearingly about his experience of American society, and upheld the American Republic's Constitutional separation of powers and checks and balances as the model for "critique," the free interplay of theory and practice and subject and object, in maintaining and promoting the freedom of society.

So powerful was the influence of the American Revolution that the Communist Party in the United States named its party night school for workers after Thomas Jefferson. Its leader in the 1930s, Earl Browder, famously stated that "communism is as American as apple pie."

What was the substance of this evaluation by such prominent Marxists of the United States, the American Revolution, and its legacy? First, we must step back and examine the Marxist understanding of history and how it had led to capitalism. The basic idea is that the rise of modern "bourgeois" society or "civil society" was a transformation on the same order of magnitude as the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, which in Marxist terms had ushered in "class society" from the original "primitive communism" of Paleolithic hunter-gatherer communities. The Industrial Revolution was regarded as the crisis of bourgeois society and capitalism, indicated by the class division into capitalists and workers, specifically the proletarianization of labor, in which workers no longer owned the means of production — the machines and other capital goods owned by the capitalist class. Capitalism, arising as such in the 19th century, was the contradiction and crisis of bourgeois society in the Industrial Revolution, in which a dynamic of replacing labor by automation introduced the business cycle of boom and bust. Not merely a commercial crisis of supply-and-demand and market adjustments, but a crisis of value and wage labor in the social system of production, indicating its potential obsolescence.

The French Revolution was closely associated with the American, itself a further development of the English Revolution of the preceding century. Thomas Jefferson participated in both the American and French Revolutions, co-writing the American Declaration of Independence as well as the French Declaration of the Rights of Human Being and Citizen, co-written by Lafayette who himself had led the French forces in the American Revolutionary War. The French utopian socialist Saint-Simon served as a soldier under Lafayette, and wrote of the indelible experience of freedom he had in America.

The American Revolution is best understood as the continuation and radicalization of the English Revolution, as expressed by Benjamin Franklin and Jefferson's revising of Locke's inalienable rights of "life, liberty and property" to "the pursuit of happiness," of which property was the mere means and not a right as an end in itself. This prepared the United States for the social freedom that made it Hegel's "land of the future" to be realized in the 19th century, contemporaneous with the rise of Marxism. One of the final expressions of Jefferson's political sentiments was to endorse, in an 1825 letter to Frances Wright, the utopian socialist experiments underway as a means for facilitating emancipation and abolition as part of the greater cause of labor.[12]

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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What is a political party for the Left?

Sacha Ismail

On March 25, 2026, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted the panel "What is a political party for the Left?" at University College London. Platypus member William Tuckley Byrne moderated the panel. The speakers were Hau-Yu Tam (co-chair of Greens Organize, a caucus in the UK Green Party), Baris Graham (Communist Party of Great Britain (Provisional Central Committee)), and Lorenzo Marconi (student at Kings College London). The prepared opening remarks of the fourth panelist, Sacha Ismail (Green Party Trade Union Group), were read aloud in absentia*, and they are presented here.*[1]

Panel description

The question of a specifically Leftist political party seems once again to be on the table — most recently spurred by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's launch of "Your Party," and the recent by-election success of the Greens under the leadership of "Left populist" Zack Polanski. The "party" question has been raised several times already in the 21st century: the neo-anarchism of Occupy, Left populist movements in Greece and Spain, as well as the Sanders and Corbyn electoral campaigns for social democracy. These too point to a deeper history of the question of politics for the Left: Chartism and the emergence of the "proletarian party," the conflict between anarchists and Marxists in the First International on the question of social vs. political action, the mass social democratic parties centralized in the Second International, Lenin's vanguard "party of a new type," up to the counterculture and social movements of the New Left. It may seem like it has never not been "party time" — and when it hasn't, "the struggle continues" elsewhere, indefinitely. What does it mean to have a political party for the Left? Toward what ends? Who or what should we look back to for inspiration? What is there to learn from recent political defeats? How would a new party differ from the Labour Party? Does the Left need politics?

Opening remarks

I'VE BEEN A REVOLUTIONARY socialist activist for about 25 years. My main *party* political activity right now is in the Green Party of England and Wales; I'm active in the Party in Wandsworth, in southwest London, and in the Green Party Trade Union Group, for which I'm Policy and Education Officer. I was previously a member of the socialist organization Workers' Liberty, with whom I share many political ideas and reference points. I'm active in the Green Party Trade Union Group because I see class as central to any meaningfully Leftist, let alone socialist, politics; and trade unionism as central to class struggle. I'm a member of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU)[2] and UNISON,[3] because until recently I worked for London Fire Brigade, as a workplace fire-safety inspector. In a few weeks I'll be starting a new job and joining a new union. Perhaps you could have me speak again in future and I'll tell you more about that.

Why is class central to Left politics? And why, if I believe it is, am I in the Green Party, whose relationship to class politics is not at all clear?

We live in a capitalist society, divided into and driven by its division into classes. Under capitalism, any elements we have won of democracy — the idea and approach that defined the Left when the concepts of the political Left and Right first emerged in the French Revolution — are hemmed in, limited, stunted, and undermined by the power of capital, the power of the employing class, power over society and specifically over the majority who survive by selling their ability to work. A meaningfully Left-wing politics, committed to majorly expanding democracy, has to center questions of class power and socio-economic inequality, which in today's world even social democracy largely does not do.

And a truly radical democratic Left politics, combining a consistent struggle for democratization with a consistent struggle to organize and assert the interests of the working class, needs to go further. It needs to develop a radical criticism of capitalism as a system, and advocacy of an alternative system resulting from working-class self-liberation. That is where Marxism begins.

I must admit to not having kept up with Platypus in recent years, but I seem to recall some of you at least are skeptical about the importance of workers' organizations such as trade unions, or skeptical about their capacity to revive and radicalize — let alone become a driving force for socialism. That is partly understandable against the background of a movement that has weakened so comprehensively in the aftermath of so many defeats. But Marxism is to a great extent meaningless unless involved in attempts to help workers strengthen and develop their organizations and struggles. Trade unions, in turn, are not the whole of the workers' movement but they remain central to it, and therefore central to any meaningfully Leftist political project.

I want a socialist political party heavily connected to the workers' movement and workers' struggles, seeking to organize a coherent drive — including in workplace and industrial class struggle, politically and ideologically — for the interests of workers and oppressed people, for radical democracy, against capitalism and for a new society in which workers' interests, democracy, and human freedom can flourish. Clearly, the Green Party of England and Wales is not that. So why am I active in it?

There is no such party in the UK, or anything close to it. Although I am no longer a member of a revolutionary socialist organization, I think such groups are worthwhile, to a greater or lesser extent depending on their specific ideas, politics, and ways of organizing and educating. I very much see myself as part of the same movement as such organizations, and in dialogue with them. But they are not a party.

There are three real political parties of the Left in the UK: the Labour Party, the Green Party and, at a push, Your Party. I would argue that socialists, even Marxists, can usefully work in all of them.

The Labour Party, with its horrendous bureaucracy, deeply pro-capitalist and neoliberal leadership, and much degraded membership and social base, is on a number of levels not really a party of the Left at all. However it remains on other levels relatable to as a Left party: not only because of its still significant Left-wing membership, its Left-wing MPs and so on, but also because of its unparalleled connections to the trade-union movement. That is true not just in the sense of the direct affiliation of many of the most important unions, including Left-wing unions, to the Party; but also the political intertwining of the Labour and union worlds. The unions, or some of them, are the one place you will meet very significant numbers of activists who are at least broadly speaking Labour Left-wingers.

Certainly there is mass anger and disillusionment with Labour among union activists. But posing it as the unions vs. Labour is not very accurate, or is at best *very* partial. The Labour Party is shaped to a large extent by the fact that the unions typically substitute grumbling and grandstanding for an actual struggle against the Labour bureaucracy and Labour Right, and for a fight for their own policies, let alone for consistently pursued working-class interests. Both the unions I was, until recently, active in are affiliated to Labour. One, the FBU, is nonetheless, by the standards of the trade-union movement, pretty consistently Left-wing. In the other, UNISON, the members have just overthrown our previous general secretary, a lynchpin of Keir Starmerism, in favor of a rank-and-file Left-winger expelled from Labour — but who is nonetheless advocating for a fight against Starmer inside the Labour Party.[4]

So there are still certainly things to be done for Leftist, class, and even socialist politics in and around the Labour Party. Given the terrible state of the Party and fracturing of the broad Left, however, it is not a given that Labour is the right place for an individual socialist to be active. That's particularly the case for those who, like me, found themselves bureaucratically excluded from the Labour Party. And now, with its surging Left-wing membership and support, including many young people and many who identify as socialist, the Green Party is also an important place to organize and argue.

The Green Party is not a class-based party even in the limited sense that Labour is or was. It comes from the Left wing of middle-class liberalism. It would be wrong to be overly schematic or doctrinaire about this, however. The Green Party is not, for want of a better term, an anchored bourgeois party, like, for instance, the Lib Dems.[5] With its surge in support its voter base has become significantly more working-class. Moreover with its surge in membership, very significant numbers of trade unionists and other kinds of working-class activists have joined the Party. The Green Party Trade Union Group, of which I am an officer, has experienced a parallel surge in membership, with thousands joining and groups forming in a variety of unions and industries. I don't want to overplay any of this, but it is significant.

Despite the popularity of the label socialist in the Green Party, the political and ideological debate there is for the most part pretty rudimentary. Nonetheless it is, and is increasingly, a space in which one can debate with — while also organizing — large numbers of people who want to see a radically more democratic society, and in many cases aspire for democracy to go beyond capitalism. I don't think socialists should sniff at that.

I have least to say about Your Party — both because unlike the Labour Party and the Green Party I have never been involved, and because it seems less important for the British Left by the day. Although my politics differ widely and on many points from those of Zarah Sultana and co., I think the victory of Jeremy Corbyn's faction is a blow against the possibility of Your Party developing as a serious movement. It is also a blow against those who want to claim that Your Party is significantly more socialist than the Green Party. Nonetheless, I do not dismiss the possibility and usefulness of socialist organizing in Your Party either, given it still has tens of thousands of members across the country and a presence among Left-wing trade unionists.

Why, from a socialist point of view, should one organize in these parties? Firstly, to more effectively organize class struggle in a wide range of areas, which cannot be done effectively without a political dimension. In place of sneering at other sections of the Left and remaining in political silos, as is far too often the case at the moment, we need unity between organizations and activists in the Green Party, the Labour Party, Your Party, the unions, and beyond to help workers and oppressed people organize and fight on a wide variety of issues, from the decline in real wages to the gutting of public services, from mounting restrictions on democratic rights to the dire climate emergency. In the context of a continued, aggressive capitalist drive to undermine living standards and rights, and the continued rise of the far Right, such united organizing and struggle is extremely important defensively; but it goes for offensive struggles too. It is necessary to win defensively and eventually go on a general offensive. It is worth adding that even if we did have a large revolutionary socialist party, in fact even if it had a majority of the working class supporting it, the need for united-front organizing and struggles would not disappear.

And secondly, how will we go beyond such struggles, to even put winning socialism back on the agenda of discussion, let alone move to a point where we can actually win it? Only by intersecting Marxist debate with discussions taking place in living workers' and other social movements, and among significant numbers of active people. And only by testing our ideas in the fire of struggles, which also means testing them in the relationships — both cooperative and argumentative — of the widest possible sections of the Left.

The fact that there is no clear path to a mass, class-based, socialist party is not a reason to withdraw from either class-struggle organizing or really existing Left political movements. It is an argument to keep taking opportunities to organize wherever we can, and meanwhile develop and test our ideas and arguments in the course of the struggle.

I want to conclude by flagging up a few outline ideas for the kind of party we need; also therefore providing measures for the different existing parties and parts of the Left and guides to what we should do in them:

(1) It should be a party oriented to supporting the rights and struggles of the exploited and oppressed, with parliamentary and electoral politics firmly subordinated to this. Its leaders and representatives in politics should not get material privileges significantly different from those of the rank-and-file members.

(2) Developing this consistently, it should fight for socialism: the overthrow of capitalism by the workers' movement and its replacement with a new, far more democratic system based on collective ownership, production for need, and a sustainable relationship with nature. That obviously implies opposition to all forms of Stalinism and bureaucratic "socialism."

(3) It should be an internationalist party, emphasizing and seeking to realize the common interests and struggles of the exploited and oppressed in every country. That implies consistent anti-imperialism rather than "campist" politics opposing only some imperialists.

(4) It should seek a strong relationship with the workers' movement, including the trade-union movement, whatever exact form that takes.

(5) As a necessary condition for meaningfully anti-capitalist and socialist struggle and politics, it should be a democratic party, controlled by its members, and not by a bureaucracy or by politicians.

(6) It should seek to develop a culture of debate and education among its members, taking theory and history, as well as immediate politics, seriously.

(7) It should approach the world in a rational, free-thinking, scientific spirit, seeking to vigorously criticize established ideas and approaches, both those coming from the capitalist mainstream and, as necessary, those coming from the Left. **|P**

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[1] Video of the panel is available at <https://youtu.be/NhDgp0WNjSs>.

[2] The FBU is a union for firefighters and emergency-services workers; it was founded in 1918.

[3] UNISON is the largest trade union in the UK; it was formed in 1993 via the merger of the National and Local Government Officers Association, the National Union of Public Employees, and the Confederation of Health Service Employees.

[4] In UNISON's 2025 general-secretary election, Andrea Egan defeated the incumbent Christina McAnea.

[5] The Liberal Democrats is a political party in the UK; it was founded in 1988.

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Party deradicalized the Left coming out of the 1960s, and they argued for a working-class-based, Left-wing party. — Then Bernie Sanders came about in 2016 through the irony of the two-party system. People like Sanders in continental Europe would have been part of third, fourth, and fifth parties and made impotent as a result. Social democracy in Germany, France, and Greece has no potential whatsoever, but it was possible here in the U.S. Now we're seeing the end of Sandersism; we're also seeing the failure of the "dirty break" strategy that Eric Blanc put out.[23]

I wouldn't put freedom and welfarism or socialism in opposition, because we have a very clear case that socialism is the precondition for freedom. None other than Kautsky made that argument convincingly, saying that capitalism itself is destroying the freedom in your labor — that you determine yourself when you work, how you work, what you produce, etc. Proletarianization is undoing that, and therefore we have a different sense of freedom. We won't undo the social division of labor, but we're going to create freedom for you through the radical reduction of work hours.

CC: We need freedom to produce a socialist party. The freedom that exists in the United States, freedom of speech, freedom of association, does *not* exist in Europe, where religious organizations are controlled by the state. The state is not going to fund a cult. In the United States, they don't fund any of it — so that means you can have cults. That's huge for building a socialist movement, because a socialist movement is going to be called a cult by the capitalists! You're not going to start a new socialist party in China; but also you're not going to start a new socialist party in Germany. The freedom to do it is here.

EF: Then why don't you have one?

CC: I'm trying!

Q&A

Marxists certainly defend the anti-colonial American Revolution. But it's necessary to defend Comrade Debs from Professor Cutrone, who presents the American Revolution as some unadulterated triumph of freedom. It was a bourgeois revolution. Debs actually said about the American Revolution on the 125th anniversary, "The founders of the republic in declaring that men were created equal evidently meant themselves alone."[24] *It's useful that Platypus has panels where people can learn about history and debate. It's not useful to have dishonest presentations. Thomas Jefferson was a slaveowner! His presidency initiated the rupture of relations with Haiti because he was worried about the spread of anti-slave revolutions; that was the material interest of the slaveocracy. A break from the capitalist parties is a question of finishing the Civil War. Finishing the Civil War is the fundamental question of black oppression, which is the secret sauce of American imperialism; it's their advantage over their imperialist rivals because the working class is continuously divided. Anybody here who actually wants to change society, you've got to say, "why is it that the George Floyd rebellions were not successful in fundamentally fighting against black racial oppression?" Read* Black History & the Class Struggle *if you're interested in changing the world.*[25]

CC: Yes, of course, and others such as John C. Reed claimed that the Civil War was not really about slavery, but about Northern capital dominating the South.[26] I prefer the Debs who said that, if they were alive today, Jefferson and Lincoln would be members of the Socialist Party and not the Democrat or Republican Parties.[27] That's a more obscure way of putting it; it involves a leap in thinking. How did they understand the revolutionary tradition?

To give in to this *Counter-Revolution of 1776*,[28] *1619 Project*[29] stuff — that's the Democratic Party's line! That's not any kind of socialist line. That's going to be taught in every school in America. "Thomas Jefferson was a slaveholder"; "the Revolution was a slaveholders' revolt"; "The Civil War wasn't really about slavery" — that's the redeemer narrative! Debs is rolling in his grave in the face of that.

EF: That quote about Jefferson and Lincoln is interesting, but if my cat had wheels, it would be a bicycle — it's totally obtuse.

CC: But Debs said it. What did he mean by it?

EF: I don't think anyone here is arguing for a *1619 Project* interpretation.

CC: Oh, really?

EF: The comrade said that any Marxist should defend the anti-colonial rebellion of the American Revolution. Do we need freedom to have socialism or do we need socialism to have freedom? This to me is almost theological. We need to achieve a consistent struggle for democratic liberties in every country, and that includes in the U.S.

Frederick Douglass says, "the Constitution leans towards freedom and therefore remains the North Star for liberty."[30] *I guess Domenico Losurdo is with us in the room, and it's liberalism versus democracy. The socialists are being identified with democracy by at least two of the panelists. To what extent does Marx tell us that it's the battle of democracy that needs to be waged by socialists, and to what extent does the American Revolution remain a guiding light? Chris said that there's a continuation from Locke to the Jeffersonian democratic revolution, Lincoln and Marx, and then Debs. I would ask him to clarify that genealogy. And there's an alternative, which is that liberalism is the counterrevolution and socialists inherit the democratic revolution. In what way do we need Marxism for that? Chris proposed that the proletarian revolution is a recovery, or the fulfillment, of the bourgeois revolution under contradictory conditions of capitalism; that seems to be a major disagreement in the philosophy of history of revolution and freedom.*

CC: Shay's Rebellion was raised. Jefferson was the ambassador to France at the time, and he wrote back his famous letter, where he said, "the tree of liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." There's more to it than that. He says, let the people revolt because it warns the leaders, and to not have the people revolt would be the death of liberty.[31] That doesn't sound like someone who's only interested in their own personal freedom as a slaveholder.

He supported the Constitution, but engaged in a political struggle over its meaning, over its practical interpretation, over its implementation. He wanted more condemnation of slavery in the Declaration of Independence, and of course he famously said that it was his lifelong project to eliminate slavery from America and felt like it was his biggest failure.[32] If we're going to remember it, we have got to remember it in its totality. Capitalism is both the continuation of the revolution, but it's also the counterrevolution within that revolution. It's not a simple matter of "which side are you on, comrades?" And yet that's where the Left has been stuck since the 1930s. It has killed any potential socialist movement even before it was born.

EF: The proletarian revolution fulfills and negates the bourgeois revolutions that unleash the historical process by which the proletariat was both born and will be abolished. This is elementary Marxism. The bourgeois-liberal constitutional regime gives a political form through which this battle will be carried out. But it cannot be realized in that form. The proletarian revolution cannot be realized within the American Constitution; it is fundamentally a Thermidorian document. I am a democrat, not a liberal monarchist or a republican monarchist. Just as the American Revolution advanced the form of the English Revolution, the French Revolution advanced the form of the American Revolution by postulating the unicameral, maximally democratic republic as the elementary political form. The proletariat must take up the tasks of the bourgeois revolution that the bourgeoisie left lying on the floor. It cannot do so if it endlessly ties itself to a bourgeoisie that will not even defend their own revolutions.

Ingar, you mentioned that capitalist governments can rule in many different forms, and you mentioned liberal and fascist forms. Are capitalist governments able to rule through democratic forms as well? How can democracy also be counterrevolutionary?

IS: The capitalist class has learned to deal with the problem of the working-class majority. The fear was, if we have universal suffrage, who will safeguard that the working class will not go the evolutionary-socialist way and unelect private property? We know now that that fear was overemphasized. The neoliberals realized we can have universal suffrage, people can vote, but their vote doesn't matter because we constitutionalize inequality. We internationalize the state; that way, the decisions that really matter can no longer be decided by people who vote.

EF: Liberalism is the ideology of the ascendant bourgeoisie, but it always contains an anti-democratic and a democratic element. In order to win the Cold War, liberalism evacuated itself of its commitments to egalitarianism, etc., and today is a hollow political system which defends nothing except the most crass bourgeois rule and a gestural social-liberalism.

At a fundamental level capitalist society is a minoritarian order. By its nature, a maximally democratic order where a majority has absolute political power is incompatible with capitalist rule. However, in an anti-democratic situation, democratic

mechanisms can become, as Engels describes it, a tool of deception, serving a role in the integration of the working class into bourgeois culture in a reactionary, bourgeois-welfarist arrangement.

CC: Didn't Marx and Engels say to their followers in Germany, if you have to prioritize something, it should be the right to speech and association and not the franchise?[33] As far as whether the French Revolution was an advance over the American Revolution, what's the point of having a constitution if you don't have a body that can rule that a law passed by the majority is unconstitutional, namely against the rights of the minority or of the individual against the state? Wouldn't socialists have to be able to appeal to the Supreme Court to defend their liberty against the state, even when that state is expressing the majority will?

The American Civil Liberties Union. Who established it? The Socialist Party! Also the NAACP. In the meantime, they've become NGO organizations associated with the Democratic Party. That's another thing that's killed the Left since the 1960s: any attempt to establish a socialist movement is immediately subjected to the imperative that it model itself on the constituency-caucus structure of the Democratic Party, and as soon as it doesn't it's cancelled. In the name of democracy and equitable representation, the socialist movement is killed before it even gets started.

The soviet system, workers' councils, and even the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat by the Second International and the Third are not direct democracy — it is representational and mediated by parties. You can't really have parties unless you have civil liberties against the state and against the majority. Why did Lenin defend the independence of labor unions in 1920, when Trotsky wanted to militarize labor and make the unions an extension of the state? Because even though it was a state ruled by Bolsheviks, communists, and a working-class party, Lenin said workers need to be able to defend their interests against us.[34] If we adopt a majoritarian, democratic criterion and desideratum, you'll kill the socialist movement before it even gets started, you'll kill the dictatorship of the proletariat if it even gets there.

There seems to be agreement that the American Revolution is key to the world revolution and that this revolution depends upon a party. In fact, this seems to be a foremost consensus or an emerging consensus, yet no such party exists. Why is this?

EF: I talked about sedimented failures, this colossal wreck that we confront. The American Left is typical of this. With each successive wave, the opportunity was posed for the formation of an independent workers' party — be it the 1870s' St. Louis uprising,[35] or in the reintegration of the CIO into the Democratic Party apparatus.[36] At each and every one of these turns, the American socialist movement has failed decisively to make the leap.

Today, you have emerging socialist layers, the inheritors of the old sectarian traditions — the Democratic Socialists of America — and various popular movements that eclipse and then integrate back into the Democratic Party. To draw those three forces together in a genuine regroupment effort is the necessary path to an American party. However, this will have to be in dialogue and in a dialectical relationship with the re-emergence of revolutionary Marxism in the entire hemisphere. American Marxists need to take their internationalist duty far more seriously than they currently do. The American Left has been derelict in its internationalist duty, and the negative reflection of this has been a kind of Third Worldism. No! American workers and American socialists have an obligation and the resources to fight.

IS: The socialist movement is always strongest where it indigenizes, and so socialism will come in different forms across different countries. Something unites Gramsci — via Otto Bauer — to Mao Zedong. They all understood it will have to be an inherently American socialism based in the American tradition, just like it had to be an Italian socialism or a specifically Chinese socialism.

If we wonder why socialism did not thrive as a movement in those countries where the economic conditions seem to be ripe, there is something to be said about New Deal liberalism. In Germany, the exit strategy from the crisis of the 1930s was the opposite of what Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) did: crushing the labor movement instead of the Wagner Act empowering it. That's something that we have to come to terms with. The working class could be co-opted because there was much to redistribute in the core capitalist countries. Now there is a structural convergence of liberal civil freedoms and material gains because the West is losing the battle against China and the global South.

What I found interesting about Americans' internationalism is that, despite the way the world views America, you are the country of the lingua franca. Every German knows more about the United States than about the Dutch, the Belgians, the Danish, the Poles, the Italians, or the Austrians. What happens here has a tremendous effect — and so did the Sanders movement. We were in the midst of the crisis of the European Left as a result of the strangulation of SYRIZA, and the Sanders movement gave people hope. Sanders's inverted Gramscianism was basically right: we invoke the working class from above and hope that it will then organize itself from below. As Mao said, the truth is in practice. That's the measure, and we will have to make mistakes in order to do things better.

EF: I disagree with quite a few things you've said. The 20th century shows us the exact limits of an American, Italian, or a Chinese road to socialism. The crisis in the Middle East today is in many ways a failure of the national road to socialism. The failure of the Latin American Left — that socialism will be realized in Cuba, Columbia, or Mexico alone, rather than as a continental revolution — is exactly the failure of the national road to socialism.

On FDR, I would argue that the reintegration of the working class into the state through a corporatist mass movement is exactly the correlate between FDR and fascism in Europe. FDR is America's most fascist president. The integration of the working class into the state exposed the trade-union movement to McCarthyism — in state unions the state could just purge communists.

I do agree that today the ruling class has lost its faith in democracy. The masses cry out for a Bonaparte. Who defends democracy today? We do. We must be the most ardent and consistent democrats. That is something that the socialist movement as a whole has lost. A good friend of mine in Poland once put this to me in these terms: Marx and Engels's historical project was to convince the republicans and revolutionaries of their day that they must take up the social question. Today, we have a Left that is fixated on the social question, and we must get them to take up the radical-republican political question.

Bonaparte was just mentioned. One thing that didn't come up yet, that I'm a bit surprised about, is Trump. What is the relationship of Trump to the American Revolution? What is the relationship of the working class to Trump? Of socialism to Trump?

CC: Because I stepped out on a limb 10 years ago with my crazy "Why not Trump?" article,[37] I feel like I have to address this. In the last 10+ years, since 2015–16, the mainstream political discourse has agonized over this "populism" question. Of course, the working class is disproportionately not represented in the electorate; both parties are interested in not having the working-class vote. I don't think Trump really represented any kind of substantial change with respect to that. However, he was vilified by both Republicans and Democrats for reaching to any extent into the working class with an appeal, because they regarded it as dangerous demagogy — neither party wants to depend on a working-class constituency.

There are people who wanted Trump to be a Bonaparte, but Trump himself much less so. Obviously, when the Democrats call Trump a fascist, they've been calling every Republican presidential candidate since Thomas Dewey in 1948 and before that a fascist. The Left tends to take up what the Democrats say and treat it in a hysteric, literal way. The Democrats know they're engaged in a figure of speech, while the Left is like, "Scientifically, what is the Marxist definition of fascism? Oh! Trump fits it to a T! It's a Strasserite kind of fascism."

It's drastic to say the ruling class has lost faith in democracy. The ruling class has perhaps lost faith in its parties, and that that's more a problem of the parties than it is of the ruling class. If the parties don't serve, then of course the ruling class will find some way of intervening, but they'd prefer to intervene through the parties. What you see is not a scramble to overthrow democracy but a scramble to somehow firm up the parties.

The Millennials landed on "Marx wasn't a liberal; he was a republican." I don't think so. The problem of a socialist party can't jump to the question of the republic or the democratic republic immediately. First, you'd need an actual social movement to motivate the creation of a new political party. Socialist parties challenged the political order in and of itself — presented a crisis of the political order. In the United States, they would routinely disqualify Socialist Party candidates because a socialist representative would not answer to their constituency that elected them but would answer to the party. That raises the question not just of the constitutional political order, but of how we understand civil-social organizations and the right to association. Again, in representative democracy, you are choosing a party to represent you, not just an individual electoral candidate. I don't think it's a simple matter of republicanism or of the legal-juridical order per se; it also raises questions of civil-social freedom and what social organizations' liberty, independent of the state, amounts to for a socialist movement.

EF: I'm not going to try to answer the question about the relationship between Trump and the American Revolution. On Trump and Bonapartism, it's clear at this point that Trumpism has failed. There was an attempt to turn Trump into an American Bonaparte. I talk about Trump as the American Sulla.[38] This failed. Trump's domestic policy is in shambles. His international policy is humiliating! The Islamic Republic is still there, and now the Americans are crying out because the price of oil has gone up too high. We might see an American fascism out of the rethinking that will happen on the American Right after this, but that's their question to figure out.

We have this problem on the Australian Left where the Left is constantly talking about fighting the Right. The reality is, you can defeat the Right, but you still remain in the dictatorship of capital. The struggle of socialism is not a struggle against the Right; it is a struggle against the capitalist ruling class. It is necessary to defeat the Right politically in order to accomplish that, but it is instrumental. Many on the Left have converted this — because the struggle against capitalism is too hard and depressing — into a struggle against the Right. It ends up being a quiet popular front where we join with the liberals in order to defeat the Right. But we cannot position ourselves as defenders of a corroded, decadent, bourgeois-liberal order. "Fight the Right," Trump fixation, etc. comes out of this.

In Australia, Trump isn't even our president. We don't have a president! We have a prime minister, who is putting trade unions under state administration, supporting the American war abroad, doing all these things at home, and the Australian Leftists are more interested in talking about what's happening in the White House than in Canberra, Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne.

IS: In 2018, we published a book called *The New Bonapartists*, because we were in the fortunate or unfortunate situation where we could analyze what the Right does when it has power. I wrote the chapter on Trump, trying to see whether Marx's theory of Bonapartism could explain Trumpism.[39] Marx's theory of Bonapartism is based on equilibrium theory: the bourgeoisie gives up on direct rule because there's an equilibrium of capital and labor. If you look at the United States' situation, obviously you could not uphold that argument. It was impossible to use Marx's Bonapartism thesis to explain Donald Trump, but there is a case to be made for Nicos Poulantzas's theory of fascism, which, even though he was a Maoist, draws a lot on Trotsky's theory of fascism: fascism as a vacuum — that when a situation has become so dire and untenable but socialist alternatives are too weak, the middle classes turn to the Right, hauling the workers with them.[40]

Right-wing authoritarian nationalism is a middle-class movement — a petty-bourgeois movement — that then has a moment of proletarianization of its base. What I find interesting is that it is or was dysfunctional in a global capitalist society. As Habermas pointed out, the problem of capitalist systemic crises is they necessitate a unified capitalist class, but the nature of a systemic crisis is that it fragments the capitalist class. That's how a crisis becomes pervasive: the state cannot manage that crisis any longer. What we see now is that the Right-wing, authoritarian nationalists become functional to the capitalist class in a situation where there is also a passive revolution, in a Gramscian sense, internationally. China is making the West authoritarian because the West can only compete with strong executive power. We need to have a third pole beyond the increasingly authoritarian liberal Center as well as the far Right.

CC: Bonapartism, a hyper-compressed concept in Marx: post-1848, post-June Days suppression of the working class. "When the bourgeoisie can no longer rule in the old way, but the proletariat cannot yet rule."[41] The bourgeoisie has not been able to rule in the old way for a very long time. The bourgeoisie used to rule socially rather than politically. Woodrow Wilson. Where did he get his inspiration from? Bismarck. He said, we have to pay lip service to the U.S. Constitution, but we need a fourth branch of government because liberal democracy can't rule industrial capitalism. So what *can* rule industrial capitalism? The deep state. The crisis of democracy that has taken form is over who does have authority. Does Trump as an elected civilian politician have the authority, or do the bureaucrats have the authority? They have tried to sabotage him every step of the way, including perhaps in this current war with Iran, meaning it seems less clear than in his first term that the bureaucracy is an impediment. But nonetheless it raises the question of the proper role of the parties — to exchange empty suits and guarantee continuity of policy through the deep state?

We are having an experiment in democracy right now: the people elected this guy. Does he know what he's doing? Has he been vetted properly? Does he read the intelligence briefings? Does that matter? The national security agencies developed a menu of options to coerce Trump; they put the killing of Soleimani as the crazy option he would never take.[42] He said he knew that they had put it on the menu as the option he's not supposed to take, and that's why he took it. We can be appalled and horrified by that, but the alternative to that is unelected rule: the real Bonapartism. As Marx pointed out, Louis Bonaparte was not Napoleon but a kind of mediocrity incapable of playing a world-historic role, but the state that he represented was the necessary instrument to maintain capitalism.[43] We're testing the limits of that. Of course Trump was never meant to be president, because he doesn't know enough to know you're supposed to listen to the bureaucrats. **|P**

Transcribed by Erin Hagood, Benjamin Katz, Rebekah Paredes-Larson, C. Philip Mills, and Allen You

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1 Communist Unity was formerly known as the Revolutionary Communist Organisation, which was founded in 2024.

2 Ingar Solty, *Trumps Triumph? Gespaltene Staaten von Amerika, autorit rer Staatsumbau, neue Blockkonfrontation* (Hamburg: VSA: Verlag, 2025); Ingar Solty, *Der postliberale Kapitalismus: Renationalisierung – Krise – Krieg* (Cologne: PapyRossa Verlag, 2025); Ingar Solty, *Edition Marxismen* (Berlin: Brumaire Verlag, 2025–27), <https://marxismen.de/>.

3 Video of the panel is available at <https://youtu.be/PkY9dSshk80>.

4 Karl Marx, "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America," *The Bee-Hive Newspaper* 169 (January 7, 1865), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>.

5 "Thermidorian" refers to the Thermidorian Reaction, which began on 9 Thermidor II (July 27, 1794) with the arrest of French revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre. It is often used as shorthand for counterrevolutionary consolidation.

6 See Daniel Lazare, *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution is Paralyzing Democracy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996).

7 These remarks are an abbreviated version of a longer article: Chris Cutrone, "Why Marxists loved America," *Sublation* (February 20, 2026), <https://www.sublationmag.com/post/why-marxists-loved-america>.

8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1988), 90.

9 V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the American Workers" (1918), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 28 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 62–75, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/20.htm>.

10 V. I. Lenin, "The Results and Significance of the U.S. Presidential Elections" (1912), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 18 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 402–04, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1912/nov/09.htm>.

11 Eugene V. Debs, "The Day of the People," *The Class Struggle* 3, no. 1 (February 1919), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1919/daypeople.htm>.

12 Thomas Jefferson to Frances Wright (August 7, 1825), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5449>: "every plan should be adopted, every experiment tried, which may do something towards the ultimate object. that which you propose is well worthy of tryal. it has succeeded with certain portions of our white brethren, under the care of a Rapp and an Owen; and why may it not succeed with the man of colour?"

13 Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Ein Blick in die Neue Welt* (Stuttgart: J. H. W. Dietz, 1887), 30.

14 See Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).

15 Charles A. Beard, "The Economic Conflict over Ratification as Viewed by Contemporaries," in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 324.

16 Terry Bouton, "Introduction," in *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

17 Werner Sombart, "Standard of Living and Ideology," in *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands (White Plains: M. E. Sharpe, 1976), 106.

18 Fabianism was a British political movement advocating for gradualist, democratic social reform. The Fabians were an influence on the subsequent Labour Party.

19 See Earl Browder, "Who are the Americans?," in *What is Communism?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936), 21.

20 Thomas Jefferson's election as president in 1800, commonly termed the Jeffersonian Revolution, was the first time in U.S. history that executive power passed between two opposing political parties.

21 Foster and Browder joined the SPA during the 1900s and joined the Communist Party USA in the early 20s, soon after it was founded. Both were also at different times heads of the CPUSA.

22 Ingar Solty, "The road not (to be) taken—Why there is no Linkspartei in the USA: The American *Sonderweg* and the structural barriers to popular third parties in the US political system," *Capital & Class* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 49–69.

23 Eric Blanc, "The Ballot and the Break," *Jacobin* (December 4, 2017), <https://jacobin.com/2017/12/democratic-party-minnesota-farmer-labor-floyd-olson>.

24 Eugene Debs, "Eugene Debs's Independence Day Address," *Jacobin* (July 4, 2020), <https://jacobin.com/2020/07/eugene-debs-independence-day-address-fourth-july>.

25 A Spartacist League/U.S. publication. See *Black History and the Class Struggle* 27 (February 2026), <https://iclfi.org/pubs/bh/27>.

26 See John Reed, "The Negro Question in America," speech at the Commission on the National and Colonial Question, Second World Congress of the Communist International, Moscow (July 25, 1920), <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch04.htm#v1-p121>: "I have too little time to explain the historical background to the Negro question in the United States. The descendants of the slave population, who were liberated during the Civil War, when politically and economically they were still completely underdeveloped, were later given full political rights in order to unleash a bitter class struggle in the South which was intended to hold up Southern capitalism until the capitalists in the North were able to bring together all the country's resources into their own possession."

27 Eugene Debs, "Speech of Acceptance of the Presidential Nomination of the Socialist Party: Chicago — May 6, 1904," in *National Convention of the Socialist Party held at Chicago, Illinois, May 1 to 6, 1904: Stenographic Report*, ed. Wm. Mailly (Chicago: National Committee of the Socialist Party, 1904), 254–56, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/spusa/1904/0506-debs-acceptancespeech.pdf>: "Thomas Jefferson would scorn to enter a modern Democratic convention. He would have as little business there as Abraham Lincoln would have in a latter-day Republican convention. If they were living today they would be delegates to this convention."

28 Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

29 A series written by Nikole Hannah-Jones and published by the *New York Times* (August 2019).

30 See Frederick Douglass, "The Constitution of the United States: Is it Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?" (March 20, 1860).

31 Thomas Jefferson to William Smith (November 13, 1787), <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/105.html>: "what country can preserve it's liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?"

32 Thomas Jefferson to James Heaton (May 20, 1826), <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-6127>.

33 See Karl Marx, "The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*" (1847), in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 225: "Does the Herr Consistorial Counsellor then believe that the proletariat, which is more and more adhering to the Communist Party, that the proletariat will be incapable of utilising the freedom of the press and the freedom of association? Let him read the English and French working men's newspapers, let him just attend some time a single Chartist meeting!"; Friedrich Engels, "The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party" (1865), in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 20 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 77: "To be consistent, it must therefore demand universal, direct suffrage, freedom of the press, association and assembly and the suspension of all special laws directed against individual classes of the population. And there is nothing else that the proletariat needs to demand from it. It cannot require that the bourgeoisie should cease to be a bourgeoisie, but it certainly can require that it practises its own principles consistently. But the proletariat will thereby also acquire all the weapons it needs for its ultimate victory. With freedom of the press and the right of assembly and association it will win universal suffrage, and with universal, direct suffrage, in conjunction with the above tools of agitation, it will win everything else."

34 See Chris Cutrone, "Lenin's liberalism," *Platypus Review* 36 (June 2011), <https://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenins-liberalism/>.

35 The 1877 St. Louis general strike was organized by the Knights of Labor and the Marxist-influenced Workingmen's Party.

36 The Congress of Industrial Organizations was a radical industrial union founded in the 1930s; it merged with the more conservative American Federation of Labor in the 1950s to form the AFL-CIO.

37 Chris Cutrone, "Why not Trump?," *Platypus Review* 89 (September 2016), <https://platypus1917.org/2016/09/06/why-not-trump/>.

38 Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix was a Roman general who revived the office of dictator after its disuse for over a century. See Edith Fischer, "Theses on Fascism, Bonapartism, and Dictatorship," *Partisan!* (May 5, 2026), <https://partisanmagazine.org/2026/05/05/theses-on-fascism-bonapartism-and-dictatorship/>.

39 Ingar Solty, "Der 18. Brumaire des Donald J. Trump?," in *Die neuen Bonapartisten: Mit Marx den Aufstieg von Trump & Co. verstehen*, eds. Martin Beck and Ingo Stützle (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag Berlin, 2018), 74–92.

40 See Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, trans. Judith White (London: New Left Books, 1974).

41 Karl Marx, "The Third Address, May 1871: The Paris Commune," in *The Civil War in France* (1871).

42 Qasem Soleimani was an Iranian military officer assassinated by U.S. missile strikes in January 2020.

43 See Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852).

The Second Industrial Revolution is conventionally dated from 1871 to 1914 — from the Franco-Prussian War to WWI. German victory over France led to unification under the Prussian Empire, which allowed for its rapid industrialization. Contemporaneously, the Meiji Restoration in Japan, the victory of the Union in the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, as well as the emancipation of the serfs in the Russian Empire meant that these countries saw rapid industrialization. The rise of these new industrial powers produced new international conflicts in global capitalism and eventually the World Wars of the 20th century.

Whereas Marx and Engels were individuals in a "party of two," relatively limited in their influence, in the era of the Second Industrial Revolution there was the emergence of Marxism as a predominant ideology in the modern proletarian socialist movement of the working class. The new socialist parties most influenced by Marxism were those in Germany, the United States, Russia, Italy, and Japan: the countries of the Second Industrial Revolution. Unlike the others, the United States was a liberal-democratic constitutional republic. It was also quickly emerging as by far the largest and most dynamic and technically innovative capitalist economy in the world. The Marxists of the Second International such as Lenin and Debs understood that the future of socialism at a world scale would be ultimately decided in America.

The contradiction between bourgeois society and its values of the rights and freedom of labor with new industrial capitalism introduced a complex dynamic in which the struggle for socialism of the industrial proletariat was connected with upholding the older revolutionary tradition and the bourgeois rights enshrined therein. Just as French socialism emerged from the revolutionary tradition there, so did socialism in the United States through both the American Revolution and the Civil War.

In Germany, the preeminent country of the Marxist-led socialist movement at the turn of the 20th century, the working class claimed the legacy of German Idealist philosophy of Kant and Hegel, which was itself inspired by the English, American, and French Revolutions, as against the capitalists: the working class claimed the intellectual and cultural heritage of the bourgeois revolution that had decayed or become "decadent" under capitalism. This was also true in England, France, and America. It is not a simple matter of proletarian socialism succeeding the bourgeois revolution in terms of leaving it behind, but of actively recovering it, struggling within the revolutionary tradition from its contradiction in capitalism. Propagandistically, this was posed as the succession of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat as the historically revolutionary — and "universal" — class. What did this express?

The universality of the bourgeois revolution suffered severe setbacks outside the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as at home with the reinvigoration of slavery as a function of the Industrial Revolution, preventing it from dying out naturally as the Founding Fathers expected. Yet there has been one continuous American Republic from the Revolution to today — however modified substantially by the Civil War and Reconstruction Amendments. France is today in its Fifth Republic, and the U.K. remains a monarchy, albeit constitutional; the U.S. remains the preeminent capitalist country in the world that it became during the Second Industrial Revolution. The Marxist understanding of the dialectical relation between capitalism and the task of socialism means that the contradiction poses itself most purely in the United States of America, and has done so since early on.

Just as in Marx's and Lenin's times, the specter of socialism or communism apparently still haunts the world, as seen in the last, Millennial generation's attempted resuscitation of its tradition. The greatest phenomenon of a new socialist movement in recent times has taken place in the United States with the Millennial Left. In it, questions of original historical Marxism — the recovery of Marx and figures such as Lenin — have figured prominently. This was also true of the 1960s New Left, which back then, as now, was influential and inspirational throughout the world. It was long understood that if Marxism is not relevant in the United States, then it is irrelevant everywhere else.

Socialist counter-identification with America as the predominant capitalist country expresses doubts about socialism. Historical Marxism's clear perspective on the foundational character of the American Revolution and central character of the United States historically in the struggle for socialism have become obscured in the present. A reactionary anti-capitalism, both on the ostensible "Left" and the avowed Right, has made a casualty of America and its revolutionary history. In its 250th year this is particularly poignant. In the recent era of neoliberalism, the American "Left" has reached to post-WWII European social democracy as a contrasting counter-model, and capitalism has been hastily identified with Anglo-Americanism. In this, both the counterrevolutionary character of social democracy and the revolutionary character of capitalism itself have been obscured. What was forgotten is that original historical Marxism opposed the welfare state of capitalism, which was seen rightly as intentionally undercutting the workers' own social capacities and struggles by making them dependent wards of capitalist politics. Instead, this counterfeiting of socialism has been accepted falsely as good coin.

The original meaning of not only Marxism but socialism itself as the promised self-overcoming and transcendence of capitalism has been deranged beyond recognition. — Worse still, "freedom" has become a strangely tabooed concept, both on the "Left" and beyond. Pessimism about America expresses pessimism about socialism; it is pessimism about freedom. Choosing the pessimistic version of capitalism in "progressive" welfarism has meant doubting the possibility of socialism that Marxism originally recognized in capitalism as a self-contradictory form of freedom.

The crossroads of "socialism or barbarism" has cut through the heart of America as the preeminent capitalist country for the last two centuries. It still does. Hence, so does Marxism, indelibly. As we remember the American Revolution and its historical legacy, we are haunted by the remaining task of socialism — to realize the historic promise of freedom as the dialectical truth of capitalism. The truly emancipatory character of the American Revolution lives, however contradictorily, in capitalism, and its fate will be determined in the struggle for socialism.

Ingar Solty: There's a certain irony that you invited someone from Germany, the country with no successful revolution but plenty of counterrevolution. Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1887 traveled to the United States after having been absorbed by the 1848 Revolution and everything that followed since, and he said, "The Americans are like children who maintain their curiosity for knowledge and the world. We Europeans like to remain in the dark."[13] Maybe we're still at that point. Chris mentioned that at least there's a Millennial Left in America; we have a Millennial Right in the whole of Europe. Since the victory of counterrevolution, with ground zero having been Greece in 2015, the far Right has been on the upsurge, and the Left has been in decline.

Historically, I agree the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary force. Its 17th- to early-19th-century revolutions were a force of progress, enlightenment, and emancipation. At the same time, the English, American, and French Revolutions already started to reveal the contradictions of bourgeois rule. They did so in three ways. First, they showcased the sharp differences between the emergent bourgeoisie and the popular classes. Second, they became visible in the exclusion of women from citizenship. And finally, they showed liberalism's limitations in the emergence of what Domenico Losurdo has called "master-race democracy."[14] These contradictions showed as early as the American Revolution itself; even if it was an anti-colonial revolution, it facilitated the emergence of American capitalist imperialism in its modern form as an empire without colonies.

When we speak of the entire age of the American Revolution, we must acknowledge that every revolution goes through phases. Each depends on the mobilization of the popular classes and may only be victorious through them. It therefore contains a democratic moment. The American Revolution was confronted with the popular classes and their demands reaching beyond the limited goals of a bourgeois revolution. Revolutions therefore usually radicalize and give birth to counterrevolutions.

In the American Revolution, the propertied classes' conservative turn happened during the revolution itself in the very process of the Founding Fathers drafting the Constitution. The revolutionary masses were largely demobilized; the democratic moment subsided. The class composition of owners entailed that the Constitution was largely written according to their interests. As Charles Beard writes in his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, the Constitution was "carried through principally by four groups of personality interests . . . : money, public securities, manufactures, and trade and shipping. . . . A large propertyless mass was, under the prevailing suffrage qualifications, excluded at the outset from participation . . . The Constitution was essentially an economic document based upon the concept that the fundamental private rights of property are anterior to government and morally beyond the reach of popular majorities."[15]

It is no coincidence, I think, that Friedrich August Hayek, the key ideologue of the neoliberal counterrevolution, based his idea of a new constitution of disciplinary neoliberalism on the U.S. Constitution and U.S. experience of having both universal suffrage and capitalist class domination at the same time, i.e., solving the problem of working-class majority from the standpoint of a minoritarian bourgeoisie in ways different from European, immediately fascist dictatorships.

American constitutionalization was thus a counterrevolution, and the various popular uprisings against it such as Shay's Rebellion show it. It was Terry Bouton who in 2007 showed in *Taming Democracy*, in what he calls the "troubled ending of the American Revolution," that "During the 1780s and 1790s, ordinary folk across the new nation perceived democracy to be under assault from elite leaders determined to scale it back from the broad ideal that had been articulated in 1776."[16]

Ultimately, the American Civil War of 1861–65, understood in Marxist terms, was fought over the question of which mode of production — the agrarian slaveowner mode of production of the South or the urban industrial-capitalist mode of production of the North — was to be the mode of production of westward expansion. After the victory of the North, the particular American exceptionalism of a developed capitalist country without a class-based social-democratic party emerged. The answer to Werner Sombart's famous question — why is there no socialism in the United States? — resulted from a number of factors. Number one, the availability of stolen land capable of cultivation. Second, the comparatively high wage level due to chronic labor shortages, which also created the efficiency craze and eventually Ford's assembly line. Third, the ethnic fragmentation of a working class composed by ethnic waves — each and every new one functioning as a non-unionized, wage-depressing, strike-breaking, working-class fraction for the previous wave. And finally, the creation of wages of whiteness as a ruling technique which made the Irish white.

Chris mentioned that America, according to Second International Marxism, would have to be the most fertile ground for socialism. I agree that socialism is born from the womb of capitalism itself. But, as a result, Eugene Debs's Socialist Party reached its peak in 1912 and then was absorbed in a Gramscian *transformismo*, by which popular revolts from below — from the Midwestern agrarian populist movement to the Pullman general strike — helped to modernize capitalist rule and bring about the particular social imperialism embodied by the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 and Wilson's entry into World War I. Sombart, contrary to Earl Browder, said that in America there is no space for socialism in between roast beef and apple pie.[17]

So, what remains of the legacy of revolution? In the 1890s, socialists were convinced that socialist revolution was inevitable. It was a strength of Marxist theory at the time to conceive of socialism as being born from the womb of capitalist society. At the same time, it was a weakness. Bernstein's revisionism, trained largely by English Fabianism,[18] considered a harmonization of capital and labor and a parliamentarian path to socialism possible. However, the 1905 revolutions and the mass-strike debate in international social democracy showed that social revolution was far from dead.

The dialectic of war and revolution, which continues today and informed — in a watered-down fashion — Obama's electoral victory in 2008, facilitated a world revolution from Ireland to the Far East. The Bolsheviks also correctly assessed that humanity and chances of success for the October Revolution depended on the success of revolution in the West. Among the revolutionaries in the West, it was merely Otto Bauer who fought for an understanding that there existed equally legitimate, diverging paths towards socialist revolution in the developed West and underdeveloped East. And it was Antonio Gramsci who, as a devout Leninist, hailed the October Revolution and sought to emulate it under Italian circumstances, later seeking to translate the same project onto a terrain of new conditions.

The experiences of the 1905 Russian Revolution and especially the 1917 Revolution showed that bourgeois revolutions were not a viable intermediate step to overcome underdevelopment and dependence for peripheral countries. Historically speaking, the revolution shifted from the core to the periphery, where conditions for revolution are easier, but for building socialism much more difficult — Trotsky and Lenin were correct in their assessment that socialism in one country would ultimately prove impossible. At the same time, we must not surrender the experience of 20th-century socialism to epideictic claims of total failure and total terror. To say today that we are not the offspring of those socialist experiments is too cheap of a way to claim innocence while cutting ourselves off from learning from past experience. Failing to learn means losing our history with all its achievements, as well as risking the same mistakes over and over again.

The fact that the Chinese Communist Party has succeeded where the Soviet Union failed — i.e., overcoming historic dependencies — and today represents a different path of modernization for peripheral countries needs to be reckoned with. Advances in any country are advances of socialism elsewhere, and vice versa. At the same time, the core-periphery relationships are shifting. We are at a world-historical turning point; 500 years of North Atlantic domination in the world are coming to an end. What if we are the semi-periphery now? What if the revolution therefore returns to the former core capitalist countries?

Responses

EF: Ingar, I agree with you. The failure of the world revolution and the historical experience of it show us that, as Lenin and Trotsky theorized, it is the places where the accumulation of capitalism's contradictions become the most acute that we see the first ruptures in the revolutionary chain. We must understand these things as part of a world cycle of revolutions and not as a particular national dynamic.

Chris, is America exempt from the laws of history? I don't think so. We have to address the problems of the failure of the Third American Revolution — the one we were expecting to happen. The story you tell about why Marxists loved America is mostly true but excludes its innermost contradictions. You quote Browder, but isn't Browder the exact representation of the total degeneration that was Stalinism? This turn to "socialism with American characteristics," "Communism is 20th-century Americanism,"[19] is Popular Frontism — an unwillingness to break with the capitalist class. This is exactly the problem of what is not being addressed here: the relationship between the invocation of the bourgeois revolutions and Stalinism.

We have to ask what objective dynamics in American capitalism and subjective failures of the American socialist movement led to a negative dialectic which produced a more and more segmented and stratified working class. In turn, we have to address the problem that, just as the liberal revolutionaries of the 19th century became the butchers of the Paris Commune, so too in the course of the 20th century does the United States move from the greatest of the bourgeois revolutionary powers to the world headquarters of counterrevolution presiding over the butchering of communist revolutionaries from Chile to Indonesia, throughout Africa, etc., that today we still must struggle against.

Is America exempt from the laws of history? No. Is America still at the heart of any world revolution? Yes. But this advance cannot be made if the American working class does not accept and challenge its position as the backbone of global counterrevolution which it remains.

CC: We forget about the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800.[20] The idea of a Thermidor, or counterrevolution, in the American Constitution leaves aside the fact that the interpretation of the Constitution was radicalized through the Jeffersonian Revolution of 1800. Jefferson supported the U.S. Constitution, but he differed over its interpretation with John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson organized the working class in his Democratic-Republican Party to achieve his electoral revolution of 1800. They were an artisanal working class, not a proletarianized one. When we think about property qualification for voting, membership in a guild, ownership of tools, or qualifications by skill could get you past the property hurdle in terms of franchise. The working class were not the poorest people in society and were not disenfranchised. That's important because the Democratic-Republican Party is the precedent for the later Republican Party of Lincoln.

I raise all this because this is before the era of the Second Industrial Revolution, Marxism, and mass socialist parties. I brought up Earl Browder semi-ironically; to my chagrin, I had to remind myself that William Z. Foster and Browder were both members of Debs's Socialist Party.[21] It challenged me to think: how would the Stalinization of the 1930s have been a plausible thing for those who had come to consciousness as pre-World War I, Socialist Party of America, Debs-style Kautskyian socialists? The question of Stalinism is a difficult one because on the one hand it's clear that Marxism *did* produce Stalinism — on the other hand, there was a liquidation of Marxism involved in Stalinism.

The painful question is: could the revolutions of the 20th century have occurred without Marxism? I would offer a dialectical view of revolution and counterrevolution in this context: perhaps there was a kernel of truth to American anti-Communism, not only as a counter-revolutionary force, but also an attempt to preserve the revolution. This dialectic of revolution and counterrevolution cuts through both sides of the Cold War and raises the entire question of Marxism and socialism at a very fundamental level. We are haunted by Marxism — even in the United States, which hasn't had a Marxist-influenced socialist movement since the time of Debs. I don't think it comes from Europe; Verso and Historical Materialism may not only depend on the American market to stay in business, but might depend on America itself to have Marxism make any sense whatsoever.

IS: Regarding the United States and the revolutionary legacy, what I find interesting is why you have had Millennial socialism while we had Millennial fascism in Europe. A working class that has a lot to lose has status panic and turns Right: "There's not enough for everyone, so we have to take it out on the underclass." In my view, the U.S. — because of tuition fees, deindustrialization, or trade-union weakness — already experienced the erosion of the middle classes, and therefore had a potential for Millennial socialism or bottom-middle coalitions.

I remember in the mid-2000s I wrote an essay for *Capital and Class*.[22] Stanley Aronowitz and Rick Wolff argued that alignment with the Democratic

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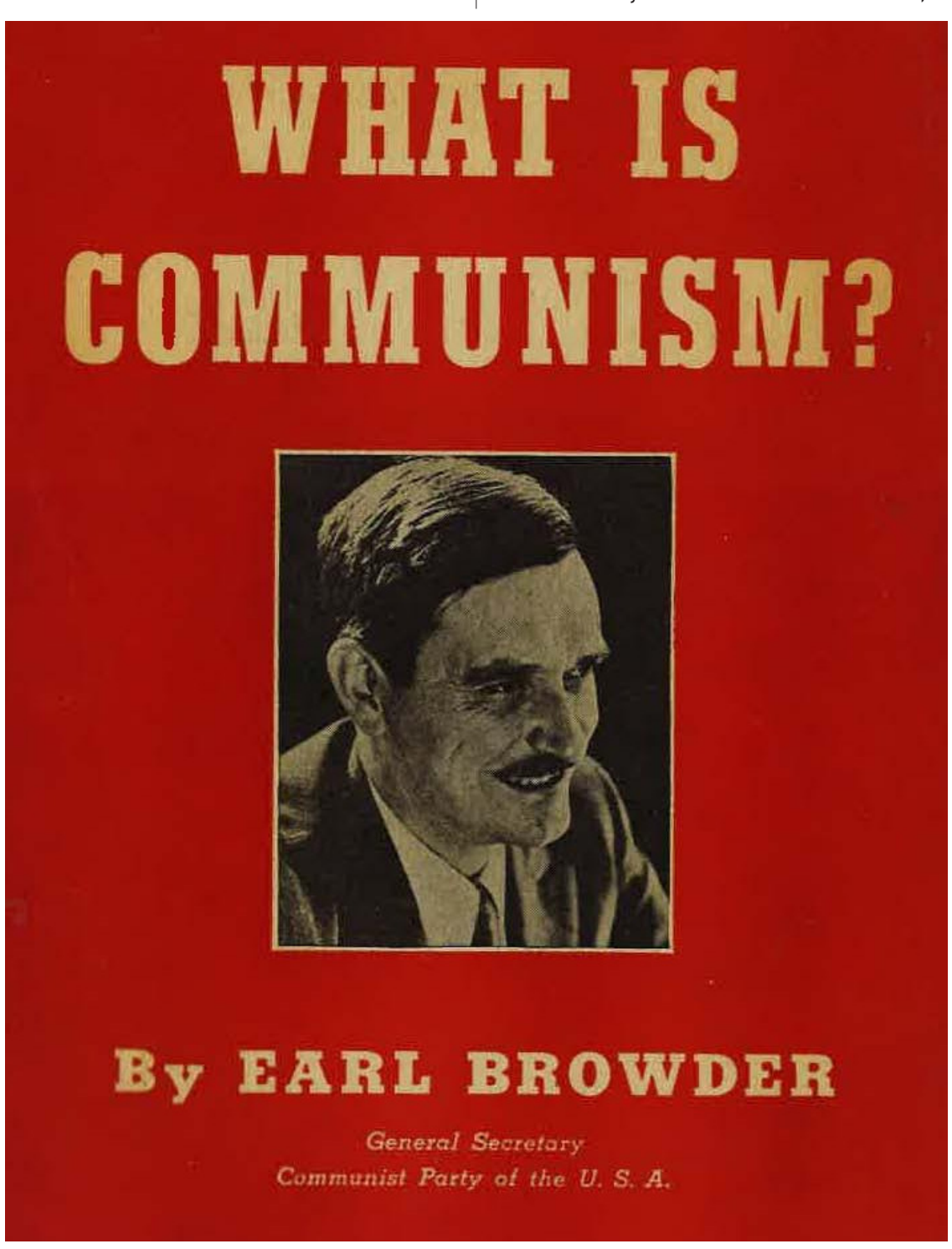

Cover of Earl Browder, *What is Communism?*